

# Capital. Critique of Political Economy

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*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. 1867. Marx has spent nearly twenty-five years writing it. “I have sacrificed health, happiness, and family” to complete this work, he writes to Mayer that year. He continues: “I laugh at people who call themselves ‘practical’ and at their wisdom [...] I would have considered myself truly UNPRACTICAL had I died without having finished my book.” (Marx, 1983: 158) What is this book about, this practical critique to which Marx has dedicated his entire life? It is about us: about our social being and our consciousness, about our political subjectivity, and about the revolutionary potentials inherent in this mode of producing social life. Let us see.

Marx begins with an analysis of the commodity, offering no further justification than the fact that this is the form in which wealth presents itself in this society. Something is merchandise if, in addition to being useful, it can be exchanged, that is, if it has value. Why does a commodity possess value? Because it is the product of work organized privately, autonomously and reciprocally independent with respect to the one who will consume said product and, therefore, with respect to all other work that produces the rest of the goods. Marx thus discovers that in this society the organization of the division of social labor—that is, the allocation of the total capacity to work available to society to the various concrete and useful forms of self-realization—is not carried out through direct relations between people but through the exchange of commodities. That the

commodity is itself this social relationship, a reified social relationship. That the commodity serves as the vehicle for organizing individual participation within the unity of social life. That the commodity is a fetish: a human product that confronts its creator as something alien and exercises dominion over him. Finally, that to begin the analysis with the commodity was to begin the analysis with human subjectivity alienated in the commodity (Marx, 1999: 43-102). Because the social character of private labor can only be made manifest in the unity of the exchange process, commodities must erect one of themselves as their general equivalent, a single commodity that serves as an expression of the value of all commodities. The enactment of this social relationship, therefore, proceeds by exchanging commodity for money and money for commodity: C–M–C. Yet, this very circulation of commodities confronts us with a counter-movement: money exchanged for a commodity, only to be exchanged back for more money: M–C–M'. This is money functioning as capital. Formal differences highlight the difference in content: in one case, it begins with a non-use value for the possessor and ends with a use value for him, the purpose is use value, consumption, the satisfaction of a personal need; In the other, it starts with money and ends with more money, that is, with the same starting point increased, the purpose is the surplus value, the satisfaction of the self-valorization process of value. Capital acts as an automatic subject (Marx, 1999: 103–202).

Given that the circulation of commodities constitutes a process involving the exchange of equivalents, the valorization of value can only be explained through the purchase of a specific commodity—one whose use-value lies in serving as the source of more value than it itself possesses. And that commodity is the labor power offered by the individual who is free in the double sense of being freed from all personal dependence and from the means of production. Consequently, all other commodities cease to appear as mere products of labor; instead, they reveal themselves as products of labor operating under the command of capital. It is no longer, therefore, a question of the production of use values through the mediation of the production of value, but the reverse, of the production of value through the mediation of the production of use values. Capital, insofar as it acts as an automatic subject, presents itself as the alienated social relation through which social production is organized and realized (Marx, 1999: 203–276).

If force decides between equal commercial rights, the isolated worker cannot help but succumb to the capitalist, condemning himself to undersell his own labor power and, therefore, to prematurely wear it down, atrophy it, and even annihilate it definitively. Capital's need to preserve its sole source of surplus value asserts itself through the constitution of the sellers of labor-power as a class, and through the class struggle surrounding the buying and selling of that labor-power. The political relations that constitute the class struggle reveal themselves as the necessary concrete form in which the economic relations constituting the accumulation of capital are realized (Marx, 1999: 277–378).

Limited by the length of the working day, capital asserts itself as the automatic subject that it is, transforming the labor process in order to produce more surplus value through increased labor productivity, which lowers the prices of goods that enter workers' consumption. Simple cooperation, the manufacturing division of labor, and large-scale industry are modes of producing this relative surplus value. In all cases, a process of the socialization of labor takes place, involving a transformation in the roles of both the capitalist and the worker, as well as a transformation in the productive attributes of the various organs of the collective worker. Under large-scale industry, as the most powerful mode of relative surplus value production, capital produces an increasing differentiation in the productive subjectivity of the working class. It condemns one segment to absolute degradation, transforming it into a superfluous working population. It degrades another segment into a living appendage of the machinery. Finally, it expands the productive attributes of yet another segment, those linked to the scientific control of natural forces and to the organization of ever-larger masses of social labor. (Marx, 1999: 379–693)

The reproduction of capital on an expanded scale demonstrates that workers emerge from the production process reproduced as workers; that their labor-power is purchased with the product of their own labor; and that their process of consumption serves solely to reproduce them, as such, for capital. In short, both outside and inside the work process, workers are attributes of capital. Yet it also reveals that the ceaseless renewal of the production of relative surplus value entails the growing socialization of private labor, and, consequently, the working class's growing capacity to consciously organize the social character of labor. Capital thus undermines its own foundations, thereby constituting the working class as the very

subject of its own revolutionary supersession. The mode of production based on the incapacity of human beings to consciously and therefore freely organize their social life process produces the mode of production of conscious and therefore freely associated individuals. As Marx states, the socialization and conscious control of the social character of labor “reach the point where they are incompatible with their capitalist shell” and “it is burst asunder” (Marx, 1999: 953; 695–967).